

Writing Film History with the Amateur: Techniques and the Archives

International conference, November 28–30, 2018, Université de Lausanne/Cinémathèque suisse

Amateur cinema has received a lot of attention during the last few years. The causes of this resurgence, or emergence, are certainly numerous, but the transformations happening within digital cultures are undoubtedly key. The amateur indeed appears as a central figure within this new media landscape, confirming the insights of Walter Benjamin in the 1930s, when he wrote: “Thus, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its axiomatic character”. If, as he said, “*any person today can lay claim to being filmed*”, we could add that, at any moment, the spectator can now become a filmmaker.

It is therefore necessary for film history to include amateur cinema, which has been long regarded as peripheral, within its purview. The amateur tradition constitutes a significant cultural practice since the beginnings of cinema, either through home movies or more sophisticated practices developed in clubs, associations, parties, schools, parishes and so forth. It also constitutes a significant part of the film industry, employing many people. The construction and sale of equipment, the manufacturing and development of film, all contribute to generating significant revenue. Their innovations, which tend to reduce the size of devices and simplify them through automation, were also consequential for theatrical cinema. The study of amateur cinema shows that its place within culture is more complex and more multifaceted than the traditional history of (professional) cinema has shown.

Nonetheless, recounting the history of amateur cinema poses specific problems. Existing usually in the form of a fragile, unique reversal print, most of the films are moreover anonymous, or as archives sometimes refer to them, “orphans.” Their abundance and dispersion make access difficult. The production context is also typically not knowable, which presents a challenge for indexing, or establishing an order of priority for restoration and historical study. These are objects that, by their very nature, follow a different periodization than professional films. Defining tendencies is similarly complicated since it implies identifying singular or exceptional usages as such. That is difficult to establish, but necessary for drawing a distinction with “normal” practices. The belief that an archaeological approach to the history of amateur cinema devices can help us understand the evolution of a filmmakers’ practices is one of the main premises of the research project initiated in 2015 at the University of Lausanne, in collaboration with the Swiss Film Archive (“Machines, Users, Institutions: Bolex, Film Technology and Amateur Cinema in Switzerland”). The unique place of the Bolex H-16 within film culture – it was used as much by anonymous amateurs as by experienced filmmakers, experimental artists, or commercial and artisanal directors – provides this study a distinct perspective.

The purpose of this conference is to reexamine the issues and methods implied in the construction of the history of amateur cinema, particularly with respect to the essential place of archives. Conceiving ways of recounting such a history involves asking where and how archives for amateur cinema are constituted and structured. How and according to what logic are film collections formed? What place is given to apparatus collections in archives dedicated to amateur filmmaking? How are these films and objects valued? What kinds of problems does amateur cinema pose in terms of archiving, indexing, and restoration? What specific technical issues arise from the use of amateur material (substandard formats, reversal film, unique color motion picture processes) or from the eventual need to keep track of the production and projection processes (machines, etc.)?

Following this, how should historians confront the construction of their object of study in light of this new corpus? When considered in context, are there conceptual differences in the very notion of “amateur cinema” as it relates to these films and devices throughout history? Does this historical research require finding new types of archives, organizing them differently or analyzing them in a new way? Are traditional methods of film analysis still pertinent and adequate given the quantity of anonymous films? How can the history of techniques and the fact these are linked to intermedial practices (photography, watchmaking, etc.) enhance our knowledge of cinema? How should the interrelation between amateur filmmakers and their techniques be conceptualized given it is both concrete and profoundly marked by the technical imaginary of the time? Finally, how can we account for the fact innovative artists or professional filmmakers often use these devices?

In order to extend these reflections on the Bolex research project, we would like to gather historians, specialists and archivists to discuss concrete cases (stories from archives, such as restoration, indexing or cataloging projects, stories of filmmakers or groups, stories of normal or exceptional practices, stories of standard or DIY machines, etc.) or theoretical problems posed by amateur cinema.

Proposals (approximately 1 page), accompanied by a brief presentation of the author, should be sent before 15 May 2018 to Benoît Turquety (Benoit.Turquety@unil.ch) and Stéphane Tralongo (Stephane.Tralongo@unil.ch).